

# Dealing with the Angry God in the Sanctuary

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# A Canonical and Comparative Reading of Divine Wrath

Two voices exist in the Old Testament—the Minor Voice of God’s preferred will and the Major Voice of God’s will adapted or acquiesced to the will of the people.

- A passage reflects the Major Voice if it:

- Dominates the whole of the Old Testament *or*
- Seems in harmony with prevailing views throughout the ancient Near East *or*
- Reflects prevailing practices but with “improvements” made on them *or*
- Comes later or secondarily in a narrative sequence after the minor voice has been heard *or*
- Is later corrected by a prophetic voice or by Jesus *or*
- Becomes the minor (less dominant) voice in the New Testament

- A passage reflects the Minor Voice if it:

- Lies *first* in a narrative sequence *or*
  - Is tied to creation and a world that is good *or*
  - Is unique to Israel vis-à-vis the other nations *or*
  - Comes from the prophetic voice that stands against the norm *or*
  - Is a part of a trajectory that corrects an earlier belief or practice *or*
  - Reaches its denouement and finds fullest expression in the life, death and teachings of Jesus.

# Divine Anger in the Hebrew Bible

- God is not angry once in Genesis, the book tied to creation and the meta beginning of the larger canonical narrative
  - In the flood, God is grieved to His heart that He had made human beings only to see them self-destruct (Gen. 6:6).
  - God is not said to be angry in the stories of the flood, Sodom, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and his twelve sons.
  - Yet anger is mentioned: Cain against Abel, implied in Lamech's vengeance, the earth filled with violence, men of Sodom against Lot, Esau's hatred of Jacob, the hatred of Joseph's brothers.

The one possible place where anger may be inferred, is the reference in Genesis 8:21:

“And when the Lord smelled the pleasing odor [of Noah’s burnt offerings], the Lord said in his heart, ‘I will never again curse the ground because of humankind, for the inclination of the human heart is evil from the youth; nor will I ever again destroy every living creature as I have done.’”

This could imply appeasement, but in later usage the term “pleasing odor” lost such a meaning. Besides, on close examination, God’s thoughts do not suggest appeasement.

- The first canonical mention of divine anger is against Moses in Exodus 4:13-14 at the end of a long dialogue with Moses protesting his divinely appointed assignment:

“But he said, ‘O my Lord, please send someone else.’ Then the anger of the Lord was kindled against Moses and he said, ‘What of your brother Aaron, the Levite? I know that he can speak fluently; even now he is coming out to meet you, and when he sees you his heart will be glad.’” (NRSV)

God’s anger is therefore giving Moses what he wants.

- This first canonical instance of divine wrath finds explicit expression in the New Testament, in Romans 1:18, 24, 26, 28, where God *reveals* (a fairly definitive word in the Greek) His wrath from heaven. How is God's anger revealed? Three times, He “gives people up” to the results of their choices. (Interestingly, this Greek verb is used three times in Isaiah 53, LXX, to describe Jesus' death.)
- Likewise, God's grief at the scene of the flood meets His wrath in Mark 3:5 (CEB): “Looking around at them with anger, deeply grieved at their unyielding hearts, he said to the man, ‘Stretch out your hand.’”

# Hebrew Words for Anger

- Most Hebrew words reflect human experiences with *human* anger: “nose” becomes anger because an angry person snorts through the nose; “to burn” becomes anger because people grow hot with rage, etc.
- But three words, when used of God, may be tied to another concept. These three words are tied to heat or fire. They are used a lot to depict God’s wrath.

## God's anger on Sinai in Face of the Golden Calf

"The Lord said to Moses, 'I have seen this people, how stiff-necked they are. Now let me alone, so that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them; and of you I will make a great nation.'

"But Moses implored the Lord his God, and said, 'O Lord, why does your wrath burn hot against your people, whom you brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand? Why should the Egyptians say, "It was with evil intent that he brought them out to kill them in the mountains, and to consume them from the face of the earth"? Turn from your fierce wrath; change your mind and do not bring disaster on your people. . . .' And the Lord changed his mind about the disaster that he planned to bring on his people" (Exodus 32:9-14, NRSV).

- Three point to consider:

- 1) Why does God need Moses to let Him alone so He can get angrier? Why would Moses standing before Him condition His anger?
- 2) God seems easy to persuade not to kill the people.
- 3) Moses pleads for God's own reputation. Wouldn't God already be concerned about that?

Is it possible that God is testing him to see if he would fall for such a selfish thing as watching the people he leads perish and then become the father of a great nation? It almost seems as if this scene is a parody of an “angry god” motif.

- Nevertheless, Moses perceives God as angry, and displays anger himself at the sight of the false worship.
- After punishing the people, he offers to make atonement for them by asking God to blot out his name. God refuses and tells him to continue to lead the people, but “on the day I visit, I will visit upon them their sin” (Exod. 32:34, mt).
- God then announces He will not go with them “or I would consume you on the way, for you are a stiff-necked people” (Exod. 33:3, NRSV).
- This leads Moses to plead extensively with God to go with them, and ultimately to ask to see God’s glory. God tells Moses that he can only see His back side, not His face, because he would die if he saw His face.

- The development of God's fiery presence
  - Exod. 19:12-13 – fence around Mt. Sinai; no one to go up the mountain or touch it on death penalty
  - Exod. 19:21 (CEB) – God warns Moses for people “not to break through to try to see the Lord, or many of them will fall dead.”
  - Exod. 33:3, 5 – God states He will not go up with His people lest He consume them on the way because they were a stiff-necked people. “If I were to go with you even for a single moment, I would destroy you” (CEB).

- Exod. 33:12-18 – Moses begs God to go with them and asks to see God's glory. Does Moses want to experience it to understand why it seems so lethal?
- Exod. 33:19-23, CEB – “The Lord said, ‘I'll make all my goodness pass in front of you, and I'll proclaim before you the name, ‘The Lord.’ I will be kind to whomever I wish to be kind, and I will have compassion on whomever I wish to be compassionate. But,’ the Lord said, ‘you can't see my face because no one can see me and live.’ The Lord said, ‘Here is a place beside the rock. As my glorious presence passes by, I'll set you in a gap in the rock, and I'll cover you with my hand until I've passed by. Then I'll take away my hand, and you will see my back, but my face won't be visible.’”

- The significance of God's destructive face

- Jacob hopes to see Esau's face and find forgiveness (Gen. 32:20).
- After his wrestling with the Angel, Jacob calls the place Peniel because he saw God face-to-face and his life had been spared (Gen. 32:30).
- When Pharaoh orders Moses and Aaron to leave, Moses tells him, Very well, I will not see your face again (Exod. 10:29).
- When Joab restores Absalom to Jerusalem (when he had killed his brother Amnon for raping his sister Tamar), David says to Joab, "He must go straight to his own house. He must not see my face."

## When God's anger burns, He hides His face

"The Lord then said to Moses, 'Soon you will rest with your ancestors, and the people will rise up and act unfaithfully, going after strange gods of the land they are entering. They will abandon me, breaking my covenant that I made with them, and I'll be the one who abandons them. At that point my anger will burn against them, and I'll be the one who abandons them! I'll hide my face from them. They will become nothing but food for their enemies, and all sorts of bad things and misfortunes will happen to them. Then they will say: 'Haven't these terrible things happened to us because our God is no longer with us?' But I will hide my face at that time because of the many wrong things they have done, because they have turned to other gods!" Deut. 31:16-18, CEB

- When the Lord makes His face to shine on you, He is gracious unto you (Num. 6:25).
- A Babylonian prays, “Turn back your neck which you have turned away from me in anger.” CAD Sh 5
- Shamash (the sun-god of justice), “ who many days ago had become angered (and) had turned his neck in anger on Babylonia in the reign of Nabu-apla-iddina, king of Babylon, relented and turned his face back again.” CAD Sh 5

Conclusion: When a person, usually a king or deity, turned their face away from someone, it meant that they were angry with that person and it could mean their death. When they showed their face to someone, it meant that they were favorable toward them and would be gracious.

# How Could God's Face Cause Anyone's Destruction?

- Which is lethal—sin or God?
  - When God passes before Moses, He pronounces His name and that name includes a long list of attributes (character): compassionate, merciful, slow to anger, full of *hesed*-kindness, faithfulness, and forgiving. Where is wrath? Is it really in “punishing the iniquity of the fathers upon the children” when Ezekiel 18 and Deuteronomy 24:16 forbid this?
  - The word “punishing” is really “visiting” and has a host of meanings that could just as readily mean administering the results of sin from generation to generation.

- If God's face means mercy, compassion, kindness, and forgiveness, but will not withhold the consequences of anyone's sinful actions, yet, if to see God's face is to die, then this can only mean that it is sin, not God's face, that destroys human beings.
- It also implies that all sinful acts stem from attitudes and motives that are unloving and indeed destroy love and its corollary, trust. These actions are more closely related to anger than to love.
- Love is life, and when one chooses its opposite, one chooses death. Because God's love gives life, when it meets someone who despises that love, the natural result is death.
- Because Moses himself was sinful, he could only bear God's back side, His turning away, that is, His wrath.

## Dealing with Divine Anger in the Sanctuary

- Did God need the sacrifices and blood?

Samuel: To obey is better than sacrifice.

Micah: Do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God.

Isaiah: Cease to do evil and learn to do good.

- Did these sacrifices assuage God's anger?

The word *kipper* can mean to appease anger.

When Jacob sends gifts to Esau, he hopes to appease him.

A wise person will appease the wrath of a king.

The offerings are labeled "a pleasing odor to the Lord."

The offerings are labeled "the food of God" (Lev. 21:6, 8, 17, 22) in common with ancient Near Eastern practices.

- Though words for "anger" are not mentioned throughout the ritual texts for sacrifices, neither is divine anger mentioned in ritual texts elsewhere in the ancient Near East. Yet it is clear that ancient Mesopotamian and Hittite gods were placated by these offerings.

- The Hebrew word *kipper*

- Scholars debate the origins of this word: does it come from the Akkadian *kaparu* “to wipe off; to smear on” or does it resemble the Arabic *kafara* “to cover”?
- Most currently lean toward the Akkadian meaning.
- The Akkadian word never means “to appease.” The Babylonians possessed other words for this.
- In other, non-ritual, contexts, when *kipper* means “to appease,” it requires a direct object such as “anger,” a person, “face,” or pronominal suffix referring back to one of these.
- In ritual texts, God is never the direct object of this verb. Rather, it receives a prepositional object (usually *‘al*) with the atoned or their sin (cf. Lev. 4:20b). This suggests that the word really infers cleansing and thus should mean, “to expiate” when found in ritual texts.

- In the LXX, the translators render *kipper* with *hilaskomai* or a derivative of it, meaning, “to propitiate.”
- But Itzhaq Feder (253-255) has shown that, though in ancient (pre-NT) Greek these terms were used to depict appeasement of angry deities, the LXX “translators used an unconventional syntax for the term . . . yielding the sense ‘expiate.’” He notes that many scholars recognize this, but “surprisingly, nearly all scholars have failed to recognize that a similar semantic transition from propitiation to expiation had already taken place in the Hebrew [use of *kipper*].”

- In summary, Feder (266) concludes, “Whereas the former [*propitiation*] consists of placating the anger of an offended party, the latter [*expiation*] pertains to undoing the ill effects of the wrong committed. The latter depiction seems to involve a more mechanistic, depersonalized conception in which bloodguilt automatically brings retribution unless it is properly addressed by the perpetrator and the community.”
- His view is supported by the fact that some of the terms for punishment are words for “sin” and terms such as “he shall bear his sin” that seem to indicate a causal nexus or inevitability between sin and punishment.

## ■ Other explanations of appeasement

- Milgrom suggests that the phrase, “pleasing odor to the Lord,” no longer has a propitiatory meaning in Leviticus. The LXX renders the term “sweet savor, while rabbis explains it as “pleasure.” In Ezekiel, its usage is limited to idolatrous worship (“except for Ezek. 20:41, where it is used figuratively”) (Milgrom 162-163).
- Psalm 50:12-13 counters the claim that God uses the offerings for food. These verses represent the minor voice since prevailing culture understood all offerings to be foods for the gods.
- Another suggestion is the term “to soften” (the face) of someone who is angry. But in contextual usage, it means primarily, “to implore.”

## ■ Other evidences against appeasement

- Divine anger may be primarily a motif of Mesopotamia, the Hittites, and the Hebrews. Among the Hittites, Feder shows that appeasement came to mean expiation. In Mesopotamia, a stronger case may be made for its retention. The question, then, remains whether the Hebrew Bible really retained the concept.
- No prayer exists in the Hebrew Bible in which a person prays for God to be appeased. The closest approximation is the plea that God "relent" (a word used for repentance") or change His mind. This is significant since prayers are marked indicators in ancient Mesopotamia of attempts to appease deity.
- In the Hebrew Bible, God is seen as the initiator of relations with humans, and the giver of life and its necessities. This is a distinction between Israel and Mesopotamia where the gods were dependent on their human slaves for offerings.
- In the Hebrew sacrificial system, the sinner usually took the life of the sacrifice, indicating a causal nexus between sin and death. Appeasement negates any direct connection between sin and death, declaring that deity is the cause of such death, thus requiring appeasement.

## ▪ Distinctions between Israel and Mesopotamia

- **Offerings.** Israel's offerings had no embellishments such as seasonings or sweeteners, other than oil and frankincense added to grain offerings (Lev. 1:1-2:16). Babylonian offerings were meals with bread, fruits, libations of beer, wine, milk, meat, fowl, vegetables, and sweets or treats (Bottero, 128). If the gods liked their food they would be less angry.
- **Appeasement.** The Babylonians sought to appease the anger of their gods. Words used for appeasement included *nâhu* and *pašāhu*. The former has a Hebrew counterpart, *nûah*, that can also mean appeasement, but is rarely used of divine wrath. Exceptions in Ezekiel describe God as resting His own anger, rather than being appeased by an external means. The latter has no Hebrew counterpart.

## Wrath in the Hebrew Bible and Mesopotamia

- In Babylonian usage, gods left when angry, but in the OT, more often than not, God did not leave, but his people left him. The notable exception took place (per Josephus) during Jeremiah's time when the Shekinah left the temple and stood on the Mount of Olives for some days until it left altogether. Yet God was still with his people when they went to Babylon as is shown by Ezekiel 1.
- In Akkadian, two major verbs for wrath exist: *agāgu* and *ezēzu*. Though often used synonymously, the former is used of a “passing emotion,” while the latter refers to “an inherent quality (akin to strength and ferocity, cf. Heb. ‘oz)” (*CAD E 428*). Both are extensively used with the gods as their subject. By contrast, when delineating Yahweh’s character, terms used do not include wrath or terms for power. See Exodus 34:6, 7.

Note these examples:

HB: "And Yahweh went by before him and called, 'Yahweh, Yahweh, a god who is merciful and compassionate, slow to anger and abundantly kind and trustworthy, keeping kindness, . . . forgiving iniquity, rebellion, and sin, but who will not absolve the guilty, handing over the sins of the fathers to the children and the children's children'" (Ex. 34:6, 7, mt).

Marduk: "On the people whom he created (the fountain of life), he imposed the work of the gods so that they were calmed. Creation and destruction; forgiveness and punishment: let it exist at his command; let them look to him....Mershakushu, the fierce yet judicious, angry (sbs) yet relenting, broadminded, his mood held in check" (*Enuma Elish* VI:129-132, 137-138, mt).

## Anger in the Major and Minor Voices

The fact that many entries containing Akkadian words for anger and wrath pertain to gods and kings suggests a very real perceptual basis for divine anger in the rise of kingship. While entries do exist that pertain to one person angry with another, these are relatively few. A study of these entries suggest that the more power kings had in ancient Mesopotamia, the more entries occur with angry kings. The peak seems to be in the Neo-Assyrian and Neo-Babylonian periods, when power of conquest was at an all-time high. During this time it seems that gods were seen as increasingly angry. One can easily perceive that if the “great man,” the king, frequently got angry and had to be placated, how much more must the great gods.

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Extending this study to the Hebrew Bible, the following may be observed. In Genesis, a book of beginnings, God is never angry. When divine anger first occurs canonically, it implies “giving in” to what a person wants. In Judges, God’s anger is manifested in “selling” His people to their enemies (not that He gets a reward for doing so; hence the verb is a metaphor similar in sense to “handing over”). This role of anger becomes increasingly mixed in the prophets who, interestingly, preach during the monarchy. While the lines may not be as clear as in the Babylonian texts, there does seem to be a correlation between anger and political power. Even the mention of divine anger in the story of Korah’s rebellion, the setting is one of a power-struggle. Thus it seems that during the monarchy, the Bible speaks in the major voice when divine anger punishes, reflecting to a great extent the dynamics of power in Israel.

## The Angry God in the Day of Atonement

- In the Day of Atonement, all that has been said here comes together.
- The context of the Day of Atonement is the dying of Nadab and Abihu while offering incense (Lev. 16:1).
  - Whatever one makes of their sin, what they did with the incense was to mix the profane (common, human) with the sacred (divine).
  - Mesopotamians burned incense to appease their gods; was this Nadab's and Abihu's plan?
  - Fire comes forth from God and kills them but doesn't burn them up. Their relatives remove their bodies in their tunics.
  - Apparently, they were in the Most Holy Place. Does this mean that they died because "no one can see [God's] face and live?"
  - This raises the question the Day of Atonement is supposed to answer: What does it take to come safely into the presence of God?

- If God's glory is essentially the physical manifestation of His love,
- If God's wrath is not part of His character but rather what happens when He lets people go,
- If sin is what causes death, not divine anger, and
- If God's love does not demand appeasement to forgive,
- Then to appease God, as if He were angry, is to reject God's love and thus to cut oneself off from His life-giving love and glory. If one did this in His immediate presence, the result would be swift and certain death.

- The Day of Atonement teaches that

- Sin must be gotten rid of from people as well as from the sanctuary to safely enter God's presence.
- The only thing that people can do to engage in this is to humble themselves—silently.
- It is the blood of Yahweh's goat that symbolically provides atonement.
- The high priest represents the people before God because he first has to offer a bull for himself and his house.
- Sin cannot abide in a sacred place inhabited by God. It must leave by means of the goat for Azazel.

- The Israelites could only humble themselves—silently, on the Day of Atonement. Neither the Psalms nor Lev. 16 refer to priestly prayers or hymns sung.
- This is in sharp contrast to the Babylonians during their Akitu Festival (the Babylonian counterpart). On the fifth day, the high priest recites this prayer (here in part) to Marduk, the patron god of Babylon:

“God-of-Heaven-and-Earth, determiner of the fates! My Lord! My Lord, be calmed! Bootes, holding mace and loop! My Lord! My Lord, be calmed! Saturn, star of justice and right! My Lord! My Lord, be calmed! Sirius, who measures (the depths) of the sea! My Lord! My Lord, be calmed! . . . Sun, light of the universe! My Lord! My Lord, be calmed! Moon, who illuminates the darkness! My Lord! My Lord, be calmed! My lord is my god! My lord is my Bel! *There is no other lord!*” (Cohen 444-445).

- Who/What is Azazel? Several positions exist.

- He has been dubbed “the scapegoat.”
  - He is a demon or demonic figure (Jewish tradition).
  - He is a typological figure of Christ as is the goat for Yahweh (Evangelical Christianity).
  - He represents “Satan” (Seventh-day Adventists).
  - Most scholars today hold the view that he is a desert demon or demonic figure. Interestingly, his name sounds similar to a Mesopotamian demon named Pazazu, whose face is quite fearsome.
  - One scholar (David P. Wright) believes he is simply the conveyer of impurities out of the sanctuary.

## The Angry God

For years, I have wrestled with the name Azazel. That he represented a demonic figure (therefore, the Satan of the New Testament), I believed. But I didn't know what to do with his name. I tried various possibilities that failed to stand before the evidence. For years, after looking carefully at the word, I concluded that it was a metathesized (in which the order of two letters is switched) form of two words, one coming from Akkadian, the other also from Akkadian, but spelled like the Hebrew form: *ezezu* + *el* = “angry god.” I even taught this to my students. But I wasn’t sure I was right and about two years ago, I stopped teaching it.

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Then last year, while looking up Hebrew words for 'z and 'zz, in Hayim ben Yosef Tawil's book, a lexical study of Hebrew with Akkadian cognates. I saw a brief note on Azazel that referred me to Tawil's article. I quickly ordered it and read it. After spending pages on the Jewish tradition and its history of Azazel as a demon, Tawil compared Azazel and the words surrounding it in Leviticus 16 with similar Akkadian and Ugaritic phraseology. He concluded, as I had, that Azazel is a metathesized form of the Akkadian *ezezu + el* and means, "fierce god." Remember that *ezezu* is the kind of anger in Mesopotamia that is characteristic of a deity. So now for an Adventist question . . .

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speech, in order that the degenerate senses, the dull, earthly perception, of earthly beings may comprehend His words. Thus is shown God's condescension. He meets fallen human beings where they are. The Bible, perfect as it is in its simplicity, does not answer to the great ideas of God; for infinite ideas cannot be perfectly embodied in finite vehicles of thought. Instead of the expressions of the Bible being exaggerated, as many people suppose, the strong expressions break down before the magnificence of the thought, though the penman selected the most expressive language through which to convey the truths of higher education. Sinful beings can only bear to look upon a shadow of the brightness of heaven's glory.—Letter 121,

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